

MICHAEL MOLLER

sporting authenticity

BARRY SMART

The Sport Star: Modern Sport and the Cultural Economy of Sporting Celebrity

Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks and London, 2005

ISBN 076194351X

RRP US \$37.95 (pb)

In 1989 the American communications theorist Sut Jhally published an important article in which he set out some of the challenges cultural studies faces when it seeks to apprehend sport. While noting that much sport today is mediated, Jhally also insists that sport is 'unlike other media messages (eg. the news), [because] sports also involve us in other ways'.¹ This something 'other', this additional form of engagement which supplements the consumption of sport as media message, is a central element in Smart's useful study of sporting celebrity.

Smart argues that sporting celebrity is achieved through the careful cultivation of 'authenticity'. Professional, mediated sport is so incredibly popular, Smart suggests, because it is able to convince spectators that what they are watching is a genuine, unscripted display of elite athletes' skill and determination. In its conduct sport offers proof of its own veracity and that of its practitioners. As Smart concludes:

The qualities associated with exceptional sporting performance, notably ability, skill, technique, speed, power, grace, motivation, commitment, courage, co-operation, competitiveness, pleasure, emotion, discipline, determination, fairness and success are witnessed, are displayed live in public, in front of spectators and in a mediated form on television. (195)

The inference here of course being that there's no way to fake it on the field. And there's much to support Smart's hypothesis that the affective

pull of sports narratives relies on perceptions of their genuineness: consider how scandals involving performance-enhancing drugs or gambling by participants are routinely identified by sports administrators as threats to the very soul of sport, that is its competitive ethos.

Of course, claims about authenticity have been widely problematised in recent years, not least because the term tends to establish a dichotomy in which the 'authentic' is privileged over the 'inauthentic'. Further, the ground on which this distinction between authentic/inauthentic, real/fake, rests is very slippery indeed. This difficulty is most evident in Smart's opening chapter. He begins by noting that the 'prominence of sporting figures is by no means a recent phenomenon' (1), but insists that there is a fundamental difference between the sporting 'heroes' of previous, less professional, eras, and the 'businesslike' approach to sport of today's sporting celebrities. (5)

At one level it is difficult to argue with Smart's assertion that professionalisation has transformed sport and the meanings we make of it. However, Smart goes further than this, following Boorstin's lead in distinguishing between 'heroes' who are real and morally significant (in the sense that they represent the values or qualities most desired within that culture), and 'celebrities' who are (often) fake and morally vacuous.² Paralleling Smart's analysis of 'the cultural economy of sporting celebrity', then, is a nostalgic narrative in which we are invited to identify with true heroes. For example, Smart suggests that the proliferation of media 'narratives outlining the acts and

achievements' of ordinary athletes makes it difficult to recognise extraordinary sporting talent. 'In consequence the potentially truly exceptional figure is inclined to get lost in a sea of mediocrity, to be obscured from view by the deluge of celebrity images and narratives to which we routinely find ourselves exposed'. (9) Such a prognosis strikes me as quite simply wrong. During the 2006 Australian Tennis Open, for example, Roger Federer was quite rightly seen as the top men's player. Commentators, notably Jim Courier, lauded Federer's game as disciplined, powerful and graceful. However, most also accepted that he had not yet done enough to warrant describing him as among the game's greatest players. Thus Courier, while generous in his praise for Federer's game, was more circumspect in comparing Federer to established greats such as Pete Sampras, stating, 'He [Federer] can be the greatest, but it's a question of whether he will. If he stays healthy, he's got as good a shot as anyone. Longevity is a big part of it. I call him the most complete player because he is. But to be the best you have to have the records'.³

It is precisely Federer's ability to actualise his potential greatness which dominates much media coverage of the sport. At the risk of sounding glib, then, there seems little evidence that the Roger Federers, Ian Thorpes and Michael Jordans of the world don't receive the acclaim they deserve. But this acclaim is continually tested and retested.

Chapters two, three and four establish historical context for the contemporary practices of sporting celebrity. Chapter two charts the

development of a number of sports in Britain and America, linking them to various aspects of modernity. There is little here in the way of new arguments about the modernity/sport nexus but Smart's account does usefully outline how sports came to be so thoroughly bound up with a number of Weberian and neo-liberalist themes: scientific rationality, industrial capitalism, bureaucratic governmentality and individualism. In chapter three Smart provides a sport-by-sport overview of the way professionalisation has opened sport/s up as a site of personal opportunity and collective meaning. He demonstrates how the professionalisation of sport facilitates new practices and the telling of new narratives. Smart also explains why some view professionalisation with suspicion. Chapter four looks in detail at the increasingly close and complex relationship between the media (especially television), corporate sponsors and sport. It is this nexus, Smart maintains, that requires analysis if we are to understand the cultural economy of sports celebrity. Further, only detailed critical analysis offers a means of discriminating between 'authentic' sports narratives and inauthentic, overly contrived ones. Smart returns here to the hypothesis established in the opening chapter, arguing, for example, that 'television's dramatisation of sport has been argued to threaten the very quality that may distinguish sport from so many other aspects of contemporary social life, namely its authenticity'. (101)

The best chapters in Smart's book are the two subsequent ones in which he analyses specific sporting celebrities. Chapter five looks

at the celebrity enjoyed by Michael Jordan and Tiger Woods, while chapter six contrasts David Beckham's fame with that of Anna Kournikova. Prefacing his reading of Jordan and Woods, Smart outlines how Nike fostered an image of itself and its products as 'the attitude brand', thereby distinguishing Nike from the genteel blandness of various sports establishments. (109) As representatives of the company's brand, the athletes signed by Nike were depicted in ways that seemed to symbolise the ethos Nike wanted to establish as its own. As Smart explains, 'the key qualities *Nike* executives looked for were attitude and a fiercely competitive drive to win'. (110) Smart makes this comment in reference to American tennis bad-boy John McEnroe, but as he goes on to explain, similar qualities would later be used to market Michael Jordan and Tiger Woods, and through them, the Nike brand. It's an important point because it suggests that marketing and sponsorship, two central practices of sports' professionalisation and mediatisation, can in fact provide tools with which to see past the mediocrity and inauthenticity of other sports celebrities. To put this another way, commercial, mediated images of, say, Michael Jordan, do not necessarily make it more difficult to distinguish athletic flair from sporting dross. In fact, the opposite would seem more likely. As Smart comments:

If global branded celebrity status is personified by Michael Jordan it has not been achieved through extraordinary basketball ability and determination alone ...

Jordan's status and meaning derived not simply from his on-court performances for the Chicago Bulls, ... but also from the off-court commercial endorsement and advertising roles he played for *Nike* on television. (110–1).

Smart makes further gestures towards a radical rethinking of the cultural work done by marketing when he notes that in the mid 1980s Nike changed their sponsorship strategy and 'decided to put all the resources into one player who would become "Nike's signature athlete"'. (115) Jordan became the sports celebrity Nike used to tell its heroic narrative.

Given Smart's earlier misgivings about the effects of contemporary sporting celebrity—that is, the tendency of the media and big business to make sport less authentic—it is perhaps not surprising that Smart doesn't fully draw out the possibility that the opposite may (also?) be true. But it is a pity, for there's much to recommend about Smart's analysis, particularly his detailed examination of the historical links between sport, media and corporate sponsorship, and the patient, detailed readings of a number of famous sportspeople. Unfortunately, Smart seems to locate authenticity exclusively in the athletic performances of the elite sports-person, while media and commercial representations of their practices are viewed, at best, as beneficiaries of this aura of authenticity, rather than as partners in its construction. For example: 'The authenticity of sporting figures like Michael Jordan, Tiger Woods and David Beckham ultimately derives from the quality of

their playing performances, from their records of success in competition'. (195)

But do individual playing performances guarantee authenticity? Or, more radically, does it even make sense to see playing performances as individual? In his account of the formal properties of the three most popular American team sports—baseball, football (gridiron) and basketball—Michael Mandelbaum suggests not. He argues that individual sporting genius, at least in part, is a consequence of particular trends in the manner in which games are played and the rules that govern them. For example, Mandelbaum shows how the skills and tactics used in basketball (he concentrates on the US league, the NBA) changed over the course of the 1980s to emphasise the genius of individual players like Michael Jordan: 'It became standard practice for four players [basketball teams consist of five players] to go to one side of the court on offense and stand idle, thereby "clearing out" the other side for the most skillful scorer to maneuver by himself, without any participation by his teammates, for a shot'.⁴ This isn't to suggest that Jordan was not a very good basketballer, but to point out that claims about the authenticity of his athletic genius overlook the ways in which sports events are themselves highly structured events. They are profoundly manufactured and artificial, with the clear objective of producing winners.

Barry Smart's book, *The Sport Star: Modern Sport and the Cultural Economy of Sporting Celebrity*, makes an important contribution to critical work on sports cultures. His detailed analysis of various sports' links to media and

corporate partners is worth engaging with, not least because it opens the door to numerous other ways of thinking about sports cultures. While I was not, in the end, convinced by Smart's argument concerning the authenticity of sporting celebrities, this is an admirable attempt to think through the unique qualities of sporting fame.

MICHAEL MOLLER teaches in the Department of Gender Studies at the University of Sydney. His current research focuses on sports scandals as sites of cultural anxiety about masculinity, embodiment and ethics.

1. Sut Jhally, 'Cultural Studies and the Sport/Media Complex', in Lawrence A. Wenner (ed), *Media, Sports and Society*, Sage, Newbury Park, 1989, p. 73.
2. Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Image: Or, What Happened to the American Dream*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1963.
3. In Andrew Webster, 'Nothing Tongue-in-Cheek about Jim's Rap on Roger', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 29 January 2006.
4. Michael Mandelbaum, *The Meaning of Sports*, Public Affairs, New York, 2004, p. 269.